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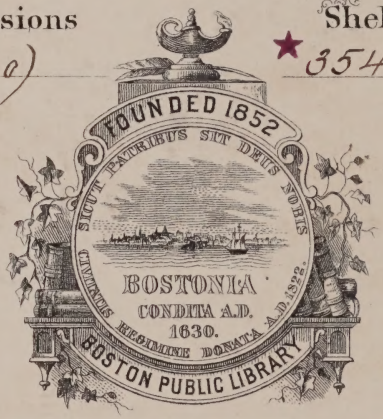

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Thirty Years in First Church:

AN

ANNIVERSARY SERMON,

PREACHED IN FIRST CHURCH, BOSTON,

By RUFUS ELLIS,
MINISTER OF THE CONGREGATION,

SUNDAY, MAY 6, 1883.

PRINTED BY REQUEST OF THE SOCIETY.

BOSTON:
PRESS OF GEO. H. ELLIS, 141 FRANKLIN STREET,
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ANNIVERSARY SERMON.

"I AM NOT COME TO DESTROY, BUT TO FULFIL."—*Matt.* v., 17.

ON the fourth day of the month of May, in the year 1853, I was installed pastor of this church; and I have completed the thirtieth year of my ministry. At several stages of this ministry, I have recited the story of the life which we have lived together: first, in that street of quiet households, now given up to noisy traffic, but still called by the name of one of our chief pastors; and then in this new, but not yet dearer Boston, where, as in the old town, the houses of God rise in fair and stately proportions amidst the pleasant dwelling-places of men, even as

> "The life of heaven above
> Springs from the life below."

I do not propose to detain you to-day with a twice-told tale. I will not even recall the experiences of our Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary, delightful as they were to so many of our own and of other religious households. That Anniversary has passed into our history, and will

live as a dear memory and will help to create its own future. But a story which it would be tedious and unprofitable to rehearse may yield to us, in a study of its aims, its methods, and possibly its results, some guidance and encouragement for new days and new endeavors,— the unceasing effort to make the thing which shall be better than the thing which hath been.

I need not remind you that these thirty years have been years of intense religious, moral, social, political activity, not without battles of creeds, conflicts of duty, antagonisms of classes, and, beyond all else, in proud but painful significance, a great Civil War,— years worth living, though often the life has been very costly. No church of the living God could be a church of mere routines and respectable platitudes in such years. In our Unitarian denomination, at the beginning of that time, it was Theodore Parker on the one side and the whole body of our churches, with scarcely an exception, on the other side. To-day, the fugitive slave sent from Boston jail his request for the prayers of the congregations; and, presently, the streets were thronged with soldiers and an excited crowd of citizens, as the national law for the return of the runaway bondsman was enforced, while the question was eagerly asked, What will our minister say and do about it?

Then came, as was inevitable, our war of civilizations and moralities, old and new,— we may almost say of the Old Testament and the New Testament,—freedom on the one hand and slavery on the other hand,—the soldiers gathering for a blessing in our houses of worship, passing to the front, and sending back their dead to the same places of prayer for the last tender offices; our sewing circles and employment societies almost exclusively occupied in providing for the sick and wounded; our Fast Days and Days of Thanksgiving no longer mere traditions, but plainly made for us, not we for them; our every-day world lifted by the terrible strain and struggle into a realm of ideals, of heroic sacrifices and victories, of faith and love; our God, like the God of the Hebrews, again a Man of War, and teaching our fingers to fight; and, when the strife was over, the large educational charities and corresponding church work following as the results of the struggle. I may add that, thirty years ago, our system of a ministry-at-large, with its free chapels, had become thoroughly stereotyped as our method of providing for church absenteeism, and the hope of recalling to our pews those who had left them from inability or unwillingness to pay church taxes had been practically abandoned, while the signs of decay and disintegration were becoming but too plain

in several of our older and most famous churches. It seemed to have been accepted, as a necessity of our times, that the rich and the poor could no longer meet together, and that we must, henceforth, have class churches.

It is not easy to recall even a single generation with perfect accuracy, so swift is the movement of our modern life; but I believe that I have a fairly distinct thought of the one thing which, from the beginning of my ministry in this church, I have been trying to do, and have been in so many ways helped and encouraged to do by honorable men and women not a few, who have passed into a higher service or still stand in their lot. My brother,* in his installation sermon, pressed the need of a religious religion; for there are religions and religions, and some of them have very little religion in them. The whole drift of the services was to that point. I was reminded, and I felt, that I had come into the charge of a church, and a church of Christ; and, from that day to this, I have sought, as your minister, and with your co-operation, to make it more and more a church of Christ, living and growing, and yet maintaining its sacred identity, and more and more fitted to do its characteristic work for the individual soul, for households and neighborhoods, for the city,

* The Rev. Dr. Geo. E. Ellis, then of Harvard Church, Charlestown.

the Commonwealth, the nation. I was not called to preside over a theologico-debating or inquiry society, an ethical club or a social club or a political party. My inheritance was in that gospel which our fathers brought across the seas, an unbound gospel, but still a gospel, given to us not to be criticised, not to be destroyed, but to be fulfilled,— absolute in its trusts, its aims, its spirit, but as seed to be constantly sowed in new ground and treated with a new husbandry, truth to be unfolded and to be applied in its endless capacities and its words which will never pass away,— a religion for us men and for our salvation here on this earth. With an extreme constitutional tendency to questioning and even denial, and sharing largely in the spirit of the age, more largely than most of you would think, I have nevertheless aimed to be affirmative and constructive, to speak, so far as I could, from faith to faith or else be silent. If I were looking for a minister, I should seek for one who believed more than I: I do not mean as to books and dates and propositions, the accidents of faith, but as to the realities of Christian experience. So looking forward, as any one with open eyes could not choose but do, to the inevitable ravages of modern criticism; and while recognizing the obligation to prove all things and hold fast only that which is

true and maintain at all costs an intellectual integrity, I have never felt it a necessity to surrender even what might prove to be only outworks at the first summons, and before so much as a gun had been fired, but have rather sought to strengthen the things which remain, to make the best of my Book, and, beyond all and through all, to keep alive and deepen that Life in God of which the Bible, Old and New, is but the record, however priceless, and the Church only the embodiment, however providential, and of the divine ordering. I was sure that our religion would abide, and, if only we could be religious in heart and life, would be its own best and sufficient evidence; and I have been rejoiced to find how independent it has proved to be of much upon which it was supposed altogether to lean.

"The new lights of historical criticism," writes Mr. Martineau (would he were still a young man!), "certainly change in no slight degree our picture of the origin and growth of the Christian religion; but every larger comprehension of the universe only invests the principles of that religion with sublimer truth, unaffected by the real discoveries and prejudiced only by the philosophical fictions of the last five and twenty years." If prophecies must fail and tongues cease and knowledge vanish away,—and why not in our time as well as in

Paul's time? — how needful that we should be deep in the faith, hope, and love which were so abundantly in Jesus, and in all those who shared his life and gave it abundantly to their world, before a line of this much criticised New Testament was written, and while the Spirit, and the Spirit alone, was leading men into all truth, bringing all things to their remembrance, and glorifying their Lord! Let us see if we cannot so believe in Jesus that he will still be our Master, though we should come to hold a suspended judgment as to much which has been told about him. I have always felt it to be my duty to make myself as familiar as possible with the modern learning about the Bible. I have never sought to throw dust into the eyes of any honest inquirer; but I have been more eager in my preaching to enter into and express the mind of Christ than to lay before the average worshipper the details of a destructive criticism. We must live in our house while we are rebuilding it, and, as my predecessor once said, — and I wish some one had recorded his every-day talk,— "Those who propose to break the church windows should go outside, and not throw stones at them from the pulpit," and "Much as I love a large house, I do not care to live in all-out-of-doors." By these constructive methods, we come at last not to be so much unclothed as clothed

upon when the raiment and even the body of the truth fall away.

And how helpless we are without the old sacred Books, the old religious speech so enriched by the use of Christian centuries, the old symbols, the old sacraments, the old benedictions. It is an offence which I cannot easily overlook, when the preacher brings out anything in this way, new and, as they say, original and advanced. I cannot tell you how I dislike it. I would sooner have him write the church hymns afresh for each Sunday. It is no accompaniment of age. On the contrary, from my youth up, I have clung to the old forms, waiting until the Spirit shall have fashioned in a way that we know not, and cannot anticipate, some new ritual. The Church of the future will come in due time; but we want a church of the present, and out of this Church of the present the Church of the future must grow. It cannot be made anew to order, as some seem to suppose, when the autumn season opens, and the reporters gather to hear and tell of the last religious novelty. It is not a popular position. It is much more exhilarating to be a liberal among conservatives, commended for breadth and boldness, than a conservative among liberals, suspected of reactionary tendencies and of coldness toward your sect, which, however dear it may be, can never be to you the

whole Church of Christ. Better, so men will say, drop back into some form of new orthodoxy or go forward into the advanced liberalism of the day, go where you belong, and be one thing or the other. But, if you can honestly be neither one thing nor the other, what remains but to stay where you are with the few, and make the best of it? So much better does it seem to me to put this special emphasis upon fulfilment as contrasted with destruction, and to keep the old and the new together, that, had I been minister of one of the historic congregational churches of New England, in which parish and town were conterminous, I should at least have tried, by my persistent and almost exclusive affirmation of what is absolute and essential in Christianity, to have kept the parish one and undivided to the practical exclusion of all conventicles, and to have retained as parishioners the most enthusiastic pietists and the most moderate moralists, and, if you will, rationalists. We are exhorted to add knowledge to faith, for we can never add faith to knowledge. We must have faith to start from. We are exhorted to apply Christianity, but we must have some Christianity to apply. What we ought most to desire is such a broadening and deepening of the mind of the old Church that we can honestly work in it; for there is and will be the hiding place of

Christian power. It is our misfortune that we have been and are excluded from it. "That we are thus at a disadvantage may not be our fault. It may be our misfortune. But, at any rate, it is not, what we too often consider it, our boast."* It is one of my fondest hopes that the day will dawn — though it can hardly be my day — when the Old Covenant of this Puritan Church will be proclaimed a sufficient bond of union for all the churches of this Commonwealth; and I would not by any needless antagonisms put this congregation beyond such a recall, in the region of a barren intellectualism, and maintaining a creed at once perfectly simple and utterly uninteresting and powerless.

Because of this love for the Christian growths and affirmations of Christian centuries, I asked you, some fifteen years ago, to use the revised Book of Common Prayer in our public worship, not to the neglect of free prayer, but in combination with it. I am satisfied that for the years to come a simple but rich ritual, in which the congregation will largely share, with a profoundly spiritual and therefore very broad and free gospel, will constitute the prevailing service in our churches. All signs point that way. Our movement in this direction was not, as some said,

*John Henry Newman.

reactionary: it was a movement forward. It will be wisdom to encourage it, to put prayer-books and hymn-books into the hands of the children as soon as they can read, to worship God in the sanctuary yourselves and train the young to worship with you in speech and song and outward act, even though you should give to the youngest a book to read or pictures to look at during sermon time, or send them home when the worship is over and the preaching is to begin. We want Sunday-schools for the young, but we want church attendance with their elders more. And here there is room to say that, if the young are to grow up in this way, they must be guided and ruled by you, as God and nature command, not you by them. How many of your boys and girls would attend the week-day school regularly, if it were left to their childishness and waywardness to determine that matter?

Again, I came into a Christian church, and I have tried to make it more truly a Christian church, because less and less a congregation for a class, and that a privileged class, and more and more a source of strength and blessing to the world around, like the communities which the first evangelists gathered in heathen cities for the better keeping of the new commandment that we should love one another. Our Sunday-school,

the growth and specialty of these thirty years, has carried us far beyond our immediate borders in works of love which are not merely sentimental, but are healthy and helpful, and have made this church a recognized force among the best charities of our city. And, besides, through this school, we are trying to handle the modern problem how to secure a multitudinous and promiscuous church attendance,— a problem which, in connection with others, we are studying in the free chapels of our ministry-at-large, or as interested lookers-on in the unpewed and untaxed churches of a portion of the Episcopal body. Our morning school, thanks to so many devoted workers and liberal givers, is an unquestioned success as a school, and requires only to be supplemented by yet another Sunday gathering, should the children's half-hour prove to be insufficient to meet the wants of those who cannot be gathered in the morning. The inward and outward burdens which our Sunday-school has lifted, the light and comfort which it has shed abroad in many homes, the young men and women who owe to it their best training, cannot be told, lest we should seem to be sounding a trumpet before us, as happily there is no need.

Again, we have tried in these years to make our church more truly a church and Christian,

because more truly a fellowship in Christian aims and works. So many of us as are engaged in our common enterprises of charity are at one in mutual knowledge and confidence; and if you desire, as you sometimes say, to come together in larger numbers and more frequently and more cordially, you only need to multiply your Christian aims and works. I think they might take a wider sweep and bring us together for conference, for report, for speaking, for hearing upon great social themes, as we have only too rarely gathered in times past. There are social enterprises in which the church as a church should make itself heard and felt; and for such purposes, as well as for worship and for the hearing of sermons, there should be frequent church meetings. The Sunday gathering and the communion assembly are not all or enough. Christianity would never have been carried over the world by those who came together simply to eat the sacred bread and to receive the sacred wine. And our religious meetings would be, as I think, improperly supplemented by soirées and dancing-parties, which, agreeable and innocent as they are in themselves, are not appropriate to the serious work of a church, and are abundantly provided for in other directions. The congregation of Christian men and women ought to be a power in modern society to promote Christian principles,

to moderate and rebuke partisanship, to advance righteousness in the State, to study and apply social laws, to hasten the coming of that far-off day when the Church and the Nation shall be one in spirit and tendency. To come together as such a congregation would seem to be in the direct line of a true Puritanism, and some approach toward a fulfilment of those Hebrew prophecies and Christian hopes which tell of a heavenly kingdom among men and not only, nay, not much of mansions in the skies.

I said that I should not recount to-day any twice-told tales, or recall, as I have already done so often, the excellent of this congregation who rest from labors which to them were privileges, and whose love and faithfulness are our best church inheritance. But it would be sheer ingratitude in you and in me not to recognize how much has come to us with the swift years, which we ought to acknowledge among the good and perfect gifts that are from above; and it would be sheer thoughtlessness not to press very seriously the question whether there has been any Christian growth, any enlargement and uplifting of hearts, any increase of faith, hope, and love, any expectation for our church answering to the promise of its birthday and its large outward opportunity. "Let no man think me foolish," wrote Paul; "but, if ye do, yet as fool-

ish receive me, that I also may glory a little: and, seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also." If not I, you are entitled to follow Paul in this. As compared with other Unitarian churches, your outward growth in these thirty years has been to lookers-on, if not to yourselves, even surprising. I do not care to go over the figures, to remind you of what seemed to be the day of small things, and yet was soon to be recognized as a day of latent strength. I will not recall the earnest purpose and the free giving to which you owe this beautiful house of prayer, the steady increase both of receipts and expenditures for your own maintenance and for your large charities. I need not repeat to you that, from living very frugally and yet to a great extent upon the avails of a parish endowment, you have come to live somewhat lavishly, and yet altogether at your own charges. And, if you have not grown in numbers as you should have done, I shall be none the less thankful that, after anxieties as to such a growth more than I care to tell you of and spread over all these years, we are where we are to-day, with abundant material for whatsoever new departure the new times may demand.

I wish I could speak with as much confidence of spiritual and moral conditions and prospects; but of these one ought always to express himself

with much reserve, and remembering Him who looks not so much upon the work as upon the worker, not so much upon the outward appearance as upon the heart. If the question be as to that religion which is to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction and to keep one's self unspotted from the world, I am sure that it has been greatly promoted in this congregation during these thirty years, and that your record will bear comparison with that of any of your contemporaries. There are works of humanity in which you have been leaders and are now second to none. The first newsboys' school and the first summer vacation school in this city were kept in the vestry of Chauncy Place Church There have been, there are, many in this congregation, of whom it has been, of whom it will be said that they were eyes to the blind and feet to the lame and companionship to the sad and lonely; that, when the eye saw them, then it blessed them; that, when the ear heard them, it bore witness to them for their unwearied care and love. And, of this pure and singular humanity, it has been continually and characteristically true that it was fed from a Divine Source, the abundance of that Love in the heart which is God in us. So far, we may seem to abound. But have we not still to ask, What of that piety which burns in the heart, and out of the

heart's abundance goes up to God as well as out to man, utters itself in prayer and song, sits at the feet and seeks to enter into the mind of Jesus, loves the consecrated place and the hour of worship, and the records of man's faith and God's revelations, is more eager to impart this abundance and transmit this inheritance to the new generation than to secure worldly position and leave worldly goods to the young, the piety which would appear in the gathering of young and old of both sexes about the communion table, and would write our old church confession upon our hearts as well as upon our windows and in our hymn-book, and make it a true utterance of our church life? If this be the question, I must candidly admit that I see no signs of any such abundance, certainly not in your minister. Do not say that I am growing old and am gloomy and morbid and expect too much, and that this must be our love of God that we keep his commandments. On the contrary, I am very hopeful as to this matter, perfectly sure that the present condition of things will not last, and is only incident to our day of intellectual questioning and exceeding materialism, and more or less true of all churches, certainly of all Protestant churches; but it is a fact none the less, and occasion for grave anxieties, and a thing to be confessed and considered and,

if that were possible, provided for. Whatever else we and all Protestants need, we need more than anything else a religion, not a philosophy of religion, we have had philosophies enough, but a religion. What we call our religion, and are trying to make the most of, is scarcely worthy the name, while we are reasoning about it and weighing its evidence and, as we say, upholding it. Upholding it! Why, it ought to uphold us: that's what it was given for. It ceases to be a religion when it no longer sets our hearts on fire, stirs missions, opens the heavens above us, blazes as a torch in our dark world, melts us in contrition, will not suffer us to be silent, gathers us in houses of prayer,—not in the mood in which we come into lecture-rooms and concert-rooms and theatres, but that we may be still before God, swift to hear and slow to speak. There is reason to hope that Christendom has come to its darkest days in this, and that there is a prospect of something better than a dreary rationalism on the one hand and a dreary superstition on the other hand. I suppose we must admit that the religious sentiment, properly so called, is less active in the Protestant than in the Roman Catholic world, and least active among the Unitarians as the most Protestant of Protestants; but I cannot believe that what we may properly call vital piety was launched upon

an inclined plane at the Protestant Reformation, and that, in our moderatism and intellectualism, we are reaching the foot of that plane.

We will indulge no such fears. Let it be our Christian privilege to be anxious for nothing,—anxiety is always unfruitful and worse; we will rather convert every seeming failure into an argument for hope. In these swift years, we waste our time in any endeavor to forecast the future. Let the living present be enough, with the persuasion that what is in part is done away only because we are drawing nearer to what is perfect, —the completeness which is promised for this world as for the world to come, and for this world first. For myself, I shall accept the new possibilities of our church work and life which you hold out to me as persuasives to that brave and cheerful and confident mind which you have a right to look for in one whose years in this Christian ministry have been crowned with kindness, and can only issue in thankfulness and peace. And, in response to so many kindly greetings and congratulations and gifts of a love which has never failed, let my heart go out to you in all gracious benedictions, that the Lord may indeed bless you and keep you, and make his face shine upon you and give you peace.

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